

The experience and doctrine of love in Ibn Arabî

by Claude Addas

"By God, I feel so much love that it seems as though the skies would be rent asunder, the stars fall and the mountains move away if I burdened them with it: such is my experience of love..." If I attributed this quotation to Rûmî or to Ruzbehân Baqlî, no one would be surprised: they are both unanimously acknowledged to be among the most illustrious representatives of the "way of love" which is at the heart of the mystical tradition of Islam. But it is from the *Futûhât*, the work whose "impassive and icy tone" Massignon denounced, that this cry from an inflamed heart issues. Massignon had read all of it; no doubt he knew this passage, but even if his sight rested on it for a few moments, he probably saw nothing more than a literary device. For him, Ibn Arabî was only a dry, haughty dialectician and nothing ever succeeded in persuading him to re-examine this opinion which he had held since his youth. Admittedly, the author of the *Fusûs* is also that of the *Turjumân al-ashwâq*; but is this collection of poems anything other than a *hapax* in the arid expanse of a gigantic corpus of abstractions? Corbin took pains to demonstrate that it was nothing of the sort. Was he understood? In any case, one can see that in recent works Ibn Arabî is always put forward as the representative of a kind of speculative mysticism within Islam which is contrasted with the kind of mysticism most famously exemplified by Rûmî. One of his translators, whom one might have hoped was better informed, recently accused him of "metaphysical imperialism". An excellent American researcher, William Chittick, has devoted two scholarly monographs to Rumi and Ibn Arabî. It is significant that the first is entitled "*The Sufi Path of Love*" and the second "*The Sufi Path of Knowledge*", respectively.

Without denying that there are considerable differences of emphasis between the *Mathnavî* and the *Futûhât*, one can see in these dichotomies the echo of age-old controversies which are no strangers to the world of Latin Christianity. Which faculty plays the essential role in the *itinerarium in deum*? Is it the will, in which love originates, or the intellect, in which knowledge originates? Several decades ago, moreover, lively debates took place over the correct interpretation of a saying that Guillaume de Saint-Thierry had taken from Saint Gregory the Great: *amor ipse intellectus est*. Among specialists of the Flemish mysticism of the Rhineland - and initially among the very authors who made this powerful mediaeval movement famous - there are numerous controversies between the partisans of a fairly suspect "mysticism of the Essence" (*Wesenmystik*), and those of a more reassuring "Nuptial mysticism" (*Brautmystik*). In the seventeenth century, the "abstract school" - that of Benoît de Canfield or the young Bérulle - raised many concerns. When the work of Eckhart surfaced at the end of the nineteenth century, after a long period underground, it provoked comments - initially among his Dominican brothers - which are astonishingly similar to those often reserved for Ibn Arabî.

Is there any point in comparing the Treatises and Sermons of Thuringien with the *Canticle of the Sun* or the writings of Angèle de Foligno? In Ibn Arabî's case, his writings convince us that it is irrelevant to place the way of love and the way of knowledge in opposition. Moreover, his works should be read without any preconceived ideas; Massignon's undisguised sympathy for Hallaj, whose "martyrdom", to use his expression, strongly evokes the Passion is easily understandable as is, in a more general way, the sympathy of some Western specialists for Muslim mystics in whom they detect

some spiritual affinities with the Judeo-Christian tradition. This should not make us forget that in the framework of the Islamic tradition, it is the Prophet Muhammad - and he alone - who constitutes the *exemplum*, the infallible model that the pilgrim of God should imitate to the highest degree. This axiom provides the basis and structure for Ibn Arabî's hagiological doctrine; it also governs his spiritual journey.

Just after the sentence declaring that the cosmos could not bear the weight of his love lest it collapse, Ibn Arabî provides us with an illuminating comment, "Nevertheless," he says, "God strengthened me in this experience of love through the *strength* that I have inherited from the 'chief of lovers' (an expression which, of course, refers to the Prophet of Islam)". Another sentence from the same passage comes back to this aspect, which is clearly fundamental in Ibn Arabî's eyes, of the experience of mystical love, "God has given me an excessive share of love, but He has also given me the ability to control it". In other words, however powerful the grace of love that overcomes him may be, he still retains mastery of the "spiritual states" which it is likely to engender: he is therefore drunk with love, but nevertheless sober.

If there is one question which has haunted Muslim, spiritual seekers since the fourth century of the Hegira, and more precisely since 24 *dhu l-qa'da* 309H/922, it is the idea of *sukr*, "spiritual intoxication". On that day, Hallaj was executed in the public square in Baghdad. Although the legal proceedings which led to his being condemned to death were also - perhaps above all - a political affair, the fact still remains that for the Sufis of yesterday and today - and Ibn Arabî shares this point of view - Hallâj died because he shamelessly revealed inviolable secrets whilst intoxicated. Moreover, on the question of whether "sobriety" is preferable to "drunkenness" or vice versa, the majority of masters declare themselves in favour of the former while emphasizing that the *summum* for the spiritual adept is to combine the two, or rather, to realise the *i'tidâl*, the perfect "equilibrium" between these two poles. It will have been understood from the above quotations, that Ibn Arabî clearly adheres to this commonly held doctrine of the "golden mean" which one should never lose sight of when dealing with his spiritual biography. In fact, a scrutiny of his writings on this subject make it apparent that this notion of *i'tidâl* takes on the utmost importance in his doctrine on the experience of mystical love in its highest degree.

The Andalusian master has written about love on innumerable occasions, either in lyrical texts, or in discursive expositions. Not only the *Turjumân al-ashwâq* and much of the *Diwân al-ma'ârif* but also numerous passages from the *Tajalliyât* and the *Tâj al-rasâ'il* fall within the province of the former genre and testify, in terms which are often allusive, to the personal experience of the author in this domain. At the very least, these works show that the the Shaykh al-Akbar does not express himself like a doctrinarian but as a witness, *shahîd*. However, here I shall devote my attention to writings of the second kind, those which are strictly speaking doctrinal expositions. In addition to a series of chapters appearing in the section of the *Futûhât* which is devoted to "spiritual states" (*Fasl al-ahwâl*) and deals with the themes of "sobriety", "intoxication" and "satiety" in particular, four of the answers to Tirmidhî's questionnaire reveal Ibn Arabî's principal ideas on this subject. Important remarks also appear in the passages dealing with the idea of "beauty" (*jamâl*) which, as we shall see, modulates Ibn Arabî's thought on Divine love from beginning to end. Finally, Chapter 178 of the *Futûhât*, entitled "On the knowledge of the station of love and its secrets", develops the subject extensively and it is therefore on that chapter that my thoughts will be focused.

Moreover, this chapter has a distinctive characteristic which, even if it is of a stylistic nature, is nonetheless significant in relation to our theme: it is the chapter in the *Futûhât* which contains the most poetry. It goes without saying that the subject under discussion, love, is no stranger to being promoted by poetic language which, by freeing words from the constraints of organised, discursive reasoning, is able to express God's ineffable desire. And because it is precisely an experience which falls within the province of the inexpressible, to provide a hint, the Shaykh al-Akbar often resorts to the most universal image there is: that of the "beloved", whose first name, for all that, varies at the whim of his pen.

"I have a Beloved whose name is that of all who have a name," he declares in the *Diwân al-ma'ârif*. It is striking that this line of poetry opens the long section of this collection containing the innumerable odes where the author proclaims without reservation the passion which consumes him. There is, in addition, a term which, in various forms, haunts this long series of poems: *hawâ'*, "passionate love", which the author of the *Futûhât* defines as "total annihilation of the will in the Beloved".

Here, among hundreds, are a few examples:

"I am the slave of passion and the slave of the Beloved."

"The fire of passion burns my heart
And the One I love is in my mind."

"Passion has seized hold of the reins of my heart
So wherever I turn my gaze
Passion is facing me."

A further testimony to this fever of love is this passage from the *Tanazzulât al-mawsiliyya*:

"All praise to God who made love (*al-hawâ'*) a sanctuary towards which the hearts of all men whose spiritual education is complete make their way and a *ka'ba* around which the secrets of the chests of men of spiritual refinement revolve."

One has to acknowledge that the tone is neither stiff nor impassive. In fact, it is a tone recognizable to all as one inspired by burning love in those who, at every moment and in everything they see, recognize and contemplate the image of the Beloved.

But is such a love allowable when its object is the Almighty? Make no mistake about it, this is not a rhetorical question - far from it. Eminent *fuqahâ'* have seriously discussed this. From Ibn Jawzî to the Wahhabite doctors, there have been many who have denounced this sacrilegious pretension and maintained that the vocabulary of love can only be used in relation to created beings. Ibn Arabî, who is not at all unaware of these controversies, starts the long exposition in Chapter 178 with a reminder of the main Divine Sayings from the Quran and the *hadîth* which attribute the act of loving now to God, now to Man. Given at the outset, one after the other, these quotations do not merely serve to forestall possible critics by giving a scriptural basis to the treatise which follows: the order in which they are mentioned, together with the particular selection, are very revealing about the principles which govern the doctrine of love in Ibn Arabî and about his priorities. So, let us examine them.

The first Quranic verse mentioned is the one which states: "Say: if you love God, follow me and God will love you." (Q. 3:31) this can never be emphasized enough: the initiatic teaching of Ibn Arabî, however complex it may appear in some of its developments, however wide the field of knowledge it covers, in the final analysis comes down to this simple idea that it is in the most rigorous conformity to the "excellent model" that the Envoy of God represents and, consequently, in the most naked obedience to the Divine law to which he himself submitted, that theomorphis is achieved and perfected. That of all the verses of the book where love is mentioned, he gave primacy to the one which solemnly states that every desire to love God is subject to the *sequela prophetae*, strongly reminds us of this.

Next there is the famous verse from the *Surat al-Mâ'ida* (Q. 5:54) which has been copiously commented on by the masters of *tasawwuf* and which states; "...He will produce people whom He loves and who love Him." *Yuhibbuhum wa yuhubbûnahû*: the order in which these two propositions are formulated is not immaterial since it implies that the love of the creatures for God is the result of the love which the Creator has for them and that it is therefore a consequence of it. With regard to the esoteric interpretation of this verse, it is worth noting that one already finds in Ghazâlî's *Ihyâ'* the idea, which is extensively developed by Ibn Arabî, that God, in His love for the creatures - which is expressed in the *yuhibbuhum* - in reality loves only Himself (*lâ yuhibbu illa nafsahu*), "in the sense," writes Ghazâlî, "that there is nothing in existence but Him (*laysa fî-l wujûd illa huwa*)." The Shaykh al-Akbar also very logically deduces from this metaphysical statement, on which what was later called *wahdat al-wujûd* was based, that the creatures never love anything but God, whether they know it or not. What is more: "the entire universe loves Him!"

The many Quranic quotations which follow are those where the Revelation specifies the virtues whose practice assures the believer of being loved by his Lord and, conversely, the attributes liable to thwart this love. These are issues of a practical nature, therefore, which one would not expect to be of great interest to an author renowned as "a grammarian of esotericism". Ibn Arabî, however, devotes a long exposition to them in the rest of the chapter. I would like to point out, in this regard, a remark which reveals the deeply prophet-centred nature of his teaching: he says that every virtue indicated by God as one that causes Him to love the person who is adorned with it, is only acquired by the believer through his assiduity in conforming to the Muhammadian model; it is at once the sign and the fruit of the sincerity of the Muhammedian *sequela*.

The two *hadith qudsî*-s which are mentioned next have provided a whole mystical literature in themselves, starting with Ibn Arabî's work. The first - which does not appear in the canonical collections, but whose authenticity Ibn Arabî certifies by virtue of a revelation (*kashf*) answers the question about why the world was created: "I was a hidden treasure and I loved (*ahbibtu*) to be known; so I created the creatures and made Myself known to them; so they knew Me." Several works, those of Corbin in particular, have shown that Akbarian cosmogenesis is nurtured entirely by this Divine saying. Ibn Arabî draws two main conclusions from it with regard to defining the role of love more specifically: that, on the one hand, on a macrocosmic level, Creation originates in Divine love and that, on the other hand, from an initiatic point of view, love and knowledge, which are key-terms in this *hadîth - ahbibtu an u'raf* - are distinct but inseparable and therefore there is no reason to contrast them.

The second *hadîth*, which is canonical, recalls the love that God has specifically for certain believers, "My servant does not approach Me with anything that I love more than the works I have prescribed for him. And he continues to approach Me with supererogatory works until I love him. Then, when I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his sight by which he sees, his hand with which he takes hold, his foot with which he walks." Therefore, both the *methods* which enable Man to be loved by God in a personal way and the spiritual *effects* of this love are set out here. In this case, Ibn Arabî is commenting on the second point, although very succinctly since he merely relates the final part of the *hadîth* ("I am his hearing...") to another Divine Saying, this time from the Quran, which states, "You did not throw when you threw but God threw" (Q. 8:17) In his reply to the fourth question on love asked by Tirmidhî, Ibn Arabî declares in reference to this, "Thus, you are the one who loves and you are not the one who loves!" (*anta muhibb lâ muhibb*). This is a paradox which explains the two doctrinal perspectives which the Shaykh al-Akbar exhibits in his writings - and which sometimes, as here, intersect giving rise to an apparent contradiction in terms: the "horizontal" perspective where he displays his pedagogy, clearly taking into consideration the subjective viewpoint of the aspirant and the vertical perspective where his metaphysical doctrine, underpinned by the idea of *wahdat al-wujûd*, is born.

Ibn Arabî concludes the scriptural argumentation of this introductory paragraph by mentioning a series of *akhbâr*, "traditions" attributed to the Prophet. I shall only reiterate one, due to the great significance it has within the Akbarian doctrine on love, "God is beautiful," the Envoy of God declared, "and He loves beauty." This *hadîth* is in fact ubiquitous in Ibn Arabî's writings on love (including this chapter [178] of the *Futûhât*)- whether he refers to it explicitly, or discreetly alludes to it - so indissociable are these two notions of love and beauty for him. It is true that *imâm* Ghazâlî accords equally great importance to this subject in the long chapter of the *Ihyâ' 'ulûm al-dîn* entitled *Kitâb al-mahabba*. However, for him beauty is only one cause (*sabab*) of love among others; for Ibn Arabî it is the primary and inexhaustible source. Therefore, he replies without a hint of hesitation to Tirmidhî's one hundred and eighteenth question: "Where does love come from?" by saying, "From his epiphany in the Name *al-Jamîl*."

Beauty, he maintains, is an efficient cause of love since it is loved per se (*mahbûb li dhâtihi*). It follows that God, who is beautiful, loves Himself. Now love is, essentially, a dynamic force: in fact it possesses the property of compelling the *muhibb* to move. It makes him *strive* towards the object of desire which, under the effect of the magnetic attraction of love, is in return irresistibly drawn towards the one who desires it. The whole universe is literally moved in this way by love. "If it had not been for love," Ibn Arabî declares, "nothing would have been desired and [consequently] nothing would exist: this is the secret contained in [His saying], 'I loved to be known.'" Love is the generating force of existence because it simply has to fill an absence or, more exactly, it wants to make *present* the loved object which is necessarily absent (*ghâ'ib*) or missing (*ma'dûm*) since it is true that one only desires what one does not have. Hence one has recourse to *khayâl*, imagination, which allows the *mahbûb* to be re-presented and which the Prophet implicitly recommended in the spiritual life when he defined *ihsân* as "to adore God as if you saw Him." However, for some people there is a risk that they will come to prefer the image which is imagined - and consequently necessarily limited - to the One of whom it is only an imperfect and limited representation.

Thus the universe, which is known by God from all eternity but which is unaware of itself, is torn from nothingness simply due to the love which God has for Himself; the movement which leads it towards existentionation is therefore, Ibn Arabî states categorically, a movement of *love*, "That is what the Prophet pointed out when he reported [from God] 'I was a hidden treasure and *I loved* to be known'; if it had not been for this love, the world would not have appeared in Him; its movement from nothingness to existence is a movement of love on the part of the One who gave it existence." The Shaykh is so deeply convinced of this that he repeats it endlessly in all the passages where he mentions cosmogenesis, usually choosing to describe this Divine drama using the symbolism of the Divine Sigh: the movement that initiates the cosmogonic process is the vibration produced by the *nafas rahmânî*, the "Breath of the Merciful". Breathing out due to the pressure of loving desire inspired by His own beauty, God releases the "Cloud" (*al-'amâ*), that is the *materia prima* which potentially contains the whole of Creation, "This Cloud is the substance of the cosmos and therefore receives all the forms, spirits and natural constitutions of the universe; it is an infinite receptacle."

Consequently, the Shaykh al-Akbar maintains repeatedly, "God only created the world through love" > ; this love is firstly love for Himself, for His own beauty which He wishes to display then, consequently, for the creatures who reflect it, "God loves beauty," he writes, "now, He is beautiful, so He loves Himself. Then He wanted to see Himself in something other than Himself, so He created the world in the image of His beauty. He looked at the world and loved it with the love of One whose look is binding." Beauty therefore takes on a primordial role, together with love, in the cosmogonic process as conceived by the Shaykh al-Akbar, whose key idea is that of *tajalliyât*, "theophanies". Captured by His beauty, God longs to manifest Himself in order to contemplate Himself. The theophanies are conceived in this desire: the universe is born from the urgent need to give them a receptacle, to provide places of manifestation for the Divine Names. "All creatures," declares the author of the *Futûhât*, "are wedding beds where God manifests Himself." Created in the image of God in order to be his *majlâ*, the epiphanic place where He displays the innumerable riches which the "hidden treasure" conceals, the world is therefore necessarily beautiful. "Nothing is more beautiful than the universe!" exclaims Ibn Arabî. The idea that the world is beautiful because the God who created it is Beautiful - an idea which does not exclude renouncement (*zuhd*) but forbids *contemptus mundi* - is in line with Ghazâlî's famous thesis, according to which this world is the most perfect possible (*laysa fî l-îmkân abda' min hâdhâ l-'âlam*). But Ibn Arabî does not stop there; he draws all the inferences, however serious, from this observation; "He created the world in the image of His beauty; He looked at the world and *He loved it*."

God cannot help loving the world which returns the image of His beauty to Him and *a fortiori*, Man, who is his *mazhar*, his place of manifestation *par excellence* as that other *hadîth* which Ibn Arabî frequently quotes testifies, "My heaven and My Earth do not contain Me but the heart of My believing servant contains Me.' By loving him, He only loves Himself. And since God knows Himself and loves Himself from all eternity, it follows that He has loved his creatures since eternity without beginning and will love them *for eternity without end*, "The love God has for His creatures is without beginning or end. [...] He has never stopped loving His creatures just as He has never stopped knowing them [...] His existence has no beginning, therefore His love has no beginning!" It is worth pointing out that about two centuries after Ibn Arabî, Julian of

Norwich (d. 1416) wrote in her *Revelations of Divine Love*, "Before he made us he loved us [...] and just as we shall be eternally, so we were treasured and hidden in God, known and loved since before time began." It is from this strictly *infinite* love that the anchorite from Norwich draws her certainty of the apocatastasis, "All shall be well", she assures us. Ibn Arabî is no less categorical, "...the entire universe is beautiful and 'God loves beauty'; now, the one who loves beauty loves that which is beautiful. And the one who loves does not punish the loved one, unless it is in order to make him find ease or to educate him [...], like a father with his child. Therefore, our final outcome (*ma'âlunâ*) will be - God willing - ease and well-being (*al-râha wa l-na'im*), *wherever we find ourselves!*" A passage from our Chapter 178 clearly indicates that the Shaykh al-Akbar is alluding here to the after-death stations, paradise and hell, "...All that," he says, "comes from His Mercy and His Love towards his creatures so that the final outcome will be happiness (*al-sa'âda*)"; he then explains this matter further by adding, "...there is another group of people who will suffer the punishment of the Next World in the fire in order to be purified. Then they will receive mercy in the fire since providence made love come first, even though they do not come out of the fire. For the love God has for His servants has no beginning and no end."

The universal and, ultimately, *unconditional* love that God vows to humanity therefore guarantees that each person will know eternal happiness *in fine*, although it is understood that it will not be of the same kind for everyone and, furthermore, some will enjoy it immediately and others later. The fact remains that the *sâlik* must strive to win the love that He bestows on the believers in a special way *but under certain conditions*, his very embarking on the mystical Path testifying to his desire to obtain this privilege...and he must pay the price. For the undertaking is hard: whoever wishes to be loved by God has a duty to be beautiful, with this unchanging beauty, because it belongs to the Divine Essence, which Man has been endowed with by virtue of his original theomorphism, although its brilliance has been tarnished by his sins. According to Ibn Arabî, the *sulûk*, the initiatic path, should lead to its shining again. When someone announced that he liked to appear beautiful (to men, that is), the Prophet replied by saying, "God deserves that more than you!" The author of the *Futûhât* takes this to mean, "You have said that you love beauty, and God loves beauty; therefore, if you beautify yourself for Him, He will love you; and you cannot beautify yourself in His eyes unless you follow me! (*illâ bi-ittibâ'î*)."

We have therefore returned to our point of departure, to this notion of *sequela* which, as one can see, governs Ibn Arabî's initiatic pedagogy in the matter of love as in all other matters which relate to spiritual life. Of the nine principal virtues that he takes into consideration out of all those that the Quran mentions as unfailingly suited to evoke God's love, it is significant that it is the *ittibâ' al-nabî* that he puts at the top of the list. He emphasizes that in addition to following the Prophet by observing what is legally obligatory, that is the *farâ'id*, this implies imitating him also in what is supererogatory, in other words the *nawâfil* and, consequently, in the "noble virtues" which he exemplified and whose practice, from then on, could no longer be regarded as supererogatory. It goes without saying that this emphasis on the two principal aspects that the precept of *ittibâ'* assume is founded on the *hadîth* already referred to, according to which the two ways of access to the Divine proximity are precisely the practice of the *farâ'id* on the one hand and the *nawâfil* on the other. For Ibn Arabî, each of these corresponds to a high degree of spiritual realization as the author of the *Sceau des saints* has shown : one that Ibn Arabî calls '*ubûdiyya al-ikhtiyâr*, service "freely given" with

regard to the *nawâfil* - performing a non-obligatory act which implies a *voluntary* choice - and one he calls the *'ubûdiyya al-idtirâr*, "imposed" service with regard to the *farâ'id* which are carried out by simple obedience. In the first case, the spiritual seeker who has not completely renounced all will of his own wants to make his quality as a *muhibb*, "lover", predominate. Now love, Ibn 'Arabî tells us, when it is sincere and absolute, ultimately results in the *muhibb* identifying himself with the one with whom he has fallen in love, to the point of taking on his attributes. Hence the theomorphosis mentioned in the *hadîth*: God is the hearing of the *muhibb*, his sight, his hands etc. Transfigured in this way by the grace of love, the spiritual seeker sees the world as it is in the eye of the Eternal One, as dazzlingly beautiful, just as he perceives the deafening murmur of the praise which "every thing", even if apparently inanimate, offers up to the "Lord of the worlds" (Q. 17:44) . From then on, he loves all creatures without exception, since in each of them he contemplates the Beloved ("Wherever you turn, there is the face of God." Q. 2:115) Moreover, Ibn Arabî emphasizes, this is the mark of the man who truly loves God.

The elect who fully realize this theomimesis are rare; even more rare are those who reach the higher station of *'ubûdiyya al-idtirâr* which results from *faqr*, the most complete "poverty". In this final spiritual station, the gnostic is, to use Ibn Arabî's expression, *maqtûl*, "killed", dead to himself and therefore incapable of the least will of his own. No doubt he is *mahbûb*, "loved" by God, although he no longer knows it, but he is no longer a *muhibb*: stripped of everything, stripped of himself and even God, whom he has abandoned any idea of possessing, he has regained the sovereign detachment - in the Eckhartian sense of the term - which was his when, enclosed in the "hidden treasure", he was without knowing himself to be. In this emptiness of the creature, God can finally pour out His heart at leisure and assume His quality of *muhibb*, which was His from all eternity, in all its plenitude. That is why, Ibn Arabî concludes, He is the one, in this instance, who clothes himself in the attributes of the saint, who is His hearing and His sight.

The theosis is therefore accomplished by man's falling to "the lowest of the low" (Q. 95:5), although the correspondence between the *'ubûdiyya* of the creature and the *rubûbiyya* of the Creator is so complete that the difference between them vanishes. Only the Perfect Man is given to know this total reciprocity, by virtue of which he is the *mithl*, the "likeness" of God in this lower world. Moreover, he is himself only the "substitute" (*nâ'ib*) of the Prophet who, due to his unsurpassable perfection, alone holds this prerogative. In a passage from the *Kitâb al-hujub*, Ibn Arabî even goes so far as to identify the person of the Prophet, or more exactly, the "Muhammadian reality", with love inasmuch as it is the motivating force of the universe: "...[Love] is the principle of existence and its cause; it is the beginning of the world and what maintains it and it is Muhammad. [...]For it is from the reality (*haqîqa*) of this Master, may God bless him and give him peace, that the higher and lower realities come to be displayed." In other words, the Prophet is the ultimate *barzakh*, the "isthmus" where high and low coincide; being in the image of God who describes Himself as "the First and the Last, the Manifest and the Hidden" (Q. 57:3) and for whom he is the "supreme receptacle" (*al-majlâ al-a'zam*) , he is both this and that and yet neither this nor that, hence his sublime perfection.

In fact, it is a *leitmotiv* for Ibn Arabî to maintain that perfection lies in *i'tidâl*, the "golden mean", in which the spiritual adept who has reached the culminating degree of

detachment dwells. Thus, Chapter 243 of the *Futûhât*, which is devoted to the idea of perfection (*kamâl*) is significantly entitled: "On the knowledge of perfection which is *i'tidâl*." Even more eloquent is this passage from the *Fihrist*, where Ibn Arabî points out that he took into account three aspects of each verse in his commentary on the Quran, "Firstly, the station of majesty (*maqâm al-jalâl*), secondly, the station of beauty (*al-jamâl*) and finally the station of equilibrium (*i'tidâl*) which is the "isthmus" (*barzakh*) from the point of view of the one who inherits from Muhammad and *that is the station of perfection*." Elsewhere he declares, "Whoever is qualified with perfection never inclines." Another time he compares it to the "blessed tree" of the *Surat al-Nûr* (Q. 24:35), which "is neither of the east nor west". It is interesting to note that this allusion to the simultaneously vertical and equinoctial status of the most perfect of spiritual adepts appears in a passage from the *Tanazzulât mawsiliyya* which is devoted to the *salât al-wustâ*, the "prayer of the middle", generally taken by the commentators to be the 'asr prayer. This coincidence is clearly not fortuitous: the chapter from the *Futûhât* which corresponds to the station of the *surat al-'asr* also deals with the "golden mean" which preserves the Perfect Man from any spiritual inclination, "With regard to the perfect spiritual adept, the Divine names mutually counteract each other so that they have no effect on him; he remains free of any influence, with the absolute Essence which is not conditioned by Names and attributes. Moreover, the perfect ones attain *extreme sobriety* (*fî ghâyat al-sahw*), just like the *Envoys*."

The Prophet of Islam was more sober than anyone else. At least, that is the belief of Ibn Arabî who emphasizes time and time again that the Envoy did not let the spiritual graces that God abundantly showered on him show. We know that for Ibn Arabî, this concealment of the attributes of sainthood constituted the sign of his spiritual perfection and the principal characteristic of his heirs, the *malamâtiyya*, whom he also often calls the "Muhammadians". This is concealment, not disguise: the *'arif* does not need to disguise his spiritual states; he transcends them, hence his sobriety. Following the example of the messenger of God, he has chosen milk rather than wine which is forbidden in this world because it has the ability to annihilate the intellect which, in this case, is no longer able to distinguish between *rabb* and *'abd*, a distinction which, according to the rules of spiritual tact (*adab*), must be respected in this world. Milk, on the other hand, does not alter distinctive consciousness; according to the interpretation which the Prophet gave it following a dream, it symbolizes the knowledge that God only gives to those whom He loves and whose desire is unquenched and forever unquenchable: the more God showers them with knowledge, the more they thirst for and the more they demand.

"Detachment", "death", "sobriety", "knowledge" - these are so many terms which could lead one to believe that the perfect saint, as Ibn Arabî conceives of him, is like a block of granite, hard and cold. Nothing could be further from the truth. Admittedly, having come so close to God, the spiritual adept is *maqûl*. However, as Ibn Arabî points out, having been killed by the love of God, he has died as a martyr. He is therefore supremely alive since that is the reward promised by God to those who offer themselves to Him. Detached from everything, he is all the closer to those who surround him and more free to love them. As for his sobriety, it is not the dryness of a person who has never known the transports of love of which it is on the contrary, the apotheosis. For it is by virtue of this sobriety that the spiritual adept can enjoy, *post eventum*, the knowledge which, without him realizing it at the time, poured upon him when God had so intoxicated him with His love that he was lost to himself; it is only when he has

regained consciousness of himself that he can advisedly judge which of the secrets revealed to him while he was with his Lord, "at a distance of two bows-lengths or nearer" (Q. 53:9) should be divulged or else kept secret. In this respect, sobriety is superior to drunkenness since it gives the saints, and *a fortiori* the Divine messengers, the *basîra*, the "clearsightedness" required for the fulfilment of their function as guides.

When Hallâj was tortured to death, Shiblî, Ibn Arabî tells us, declared, "We have drunk from the same cup, but I remained sober and he remained drunk." Hallâj, who came to hear of this remark while he was displayed on the gallows, replied, "If he had drunk what I have drank, the same would have happened to him as happened to me." "I accept Shiblî's testimony," concludes Ibn Arabî, "but not that of Hallâj [...] for Hallâj was intoxicated and Shiblî was sober."

Let us not be mistaken; Ibn Arabî is not questioning the *content* of what Hallâj said but the fact that he said it while under the sway of drunkenness which, he emphasizes, by definition excludes "impartiality" (*al-'adl*, a term from the same root as *i'tidâl*) on the part of the speaker. From then on, his testimony should be impugned at once, *even though*, he insists, *what he says is true*.

*style='font-family:"Times New Roman"'>Anâ man ahwâ wa man ahwâ anâ: the Shaykh al-Akbar quotes this famous line by Hallâj no less than three times in the chapter on love in the *Futûhât* ; there is no doubt that he had experienced what it means, "When you love Him, you know from the moment you drink the potion of His love for you that your love for Him is the same as His love for you; and this potion intoxicates you so much that you forget your love for Him although you feel that you love Him; so, give up trying to distinguish between these two kinds of love."*

Love is born from absence. When this absence becomes presence, love becomes knowledge; when this love is the love of God, this knowledge is knowledge of God; and when this knowledge is perfect, there is no longer an *'ârif* because God alone knows God who is the "knower, knowledge and the known."

In conclusion the author of the *Futûhât* does not entirely disagree with those of the *'ulamâ'* who are scandalised by the idea that the All-powerful God could be loved by a miserable creature; their only mistake is to posit an irreducible duality when, from a metaphysical point of view, there is only the One without second; from this perspective, there is only God who loves Himself (*mâ ahabba Llâh illâ Llâh*). Furthermore, "love is the quality of what is existent and there is nothing in existence except Him, [...] there is no being but Him, therefore there is no lover or beloved but Him!" This is precisely what the spiritual adept who is drenched with love discovers when he reaches the highest degree of conformity to the *uswa hasana*, the supreme Muhammadian paradigm.

Translated from the French by Cecilia Twinch on behalf of the Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society for the Symposium at Worcester College, Oxford, May 4-6th 2002.